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ABSTRACT

The topic of agenda setting has been one of the most researched fields in mass communication since its introduction in 1972. M. E. McCombs and D. L. Shaw (1972) began a research collection of over 200 projects by upholding the hypothesis that the media cannot tell viewers what to think but it can tell them what to think about. The question arises as to what extent this study could be replicated today. A current study retraced the steps of the study, asking at each juncture how differences in the media landscape between 1968 and the present would affect agenda setting research. In the area of television news, results report considerable differences between the time periods. While McCombs and Shaw worked from the assumptions that two network newscasts commanded a mass audience, the same assumptions would not be operative today, as the menu of television newscasts has diversified. Further, fiber optics promises to offer viewers individual choices about movies, television shows, and newscasts. In the area of news magazines, results report again that while McCombs and Shaw work from the assumption that "Time" and "Newsweek" are representative, no such consensus exists today. While the circulation of these two magazines has been dropping, the number of magazines in print has more than doubled, reaching 3,000 in 1990. This is not to suggest that agenda setting research is no longer possible, but that given the changes noted above, it will move in two directions: toward homogeneous research groups or toward personal gatekeepers. (Contains 25 references.) (TB)

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The Future of Agenda Setting Research:

New Audiences and New Gatekeepers

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Running Head: AGENDA SETTING FUTURE

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Abstract

A paradigm shift is occurring from the Industrial Age to the Information Age bringing with it a host of new technologies. More and more entertainment is being provided through interactive formats allowing the consumer to choose what is viewed. People will no longer be dependent on what a medium provides. Individuals, homogeneous audiences created by the media they choose, and personal gatekeeping will become the future of agenda setting research.

The Future of Agenda Setting Research: New Audiences and New Gatekeepers

A paradigm shift is underway in the United States as well as parts of Europe and Asia, a paradigm shift with ramifications as far reaching as the shift from the Agricultural Age to the Industrial Age. Technology is ushering in the Information Age.

Just as the steam engine can be credited with beginning the Industrial Age, the transistor brought on the Information Age (Brody, 1990). The computer, filled with its transistors, is allowing data to be stored, computed, and sent anywhere in the world faster and more efficiently than ever before. Every twenty years since 1900 the amount of computational power that can be bought with one dollar has increased by a factor of 1000. There is now more computational power in a new car than there was in an Apollo spacecraft (Davis & Davidson, 1991).

The first signs of the paradigm shift towards the Information Age are already occurring. Paper is being used less and less (Myers, Wilson, & Lienhard, 1992).

For example, every article and book used in creating this paper was found using a computer. No card catalog. Many journals as well as some popular magazines have also begun to move away from using paper. Many arrive arrive on floppy disc or are immediately sent to subscriber databases over phone lines. The text need never be printed (Meyers, Wilson, & Lienhard, 1992). In addition, date books and note pads are beginning to be replaced by handheld computers like the Apple Newton (Johnson, 1993).

The technologies described above have more in common than just the elimination of paper, they're interactive. The books and articles used in this paper were found by entering a key word into a computer. A journal sent to a database allows the user to read what article he or she chooses from a computer menu without having to flip through page after page, and handheld computers are now able to send and receive faxes. The Information Age is so named because information has become a product and new technologies are being created that will move it from place to place, computer to computer. The defining trait of

technology in the Information Age is their being interactive (Brody, 1990).

Discussions about an interactive future rival any James Bond movie and are just about as entertaining. However, discussions that will surely ensue as this future becomes more and more apparent must take on a deeper realm than simply the performance of new technologies. What scholars must entertain are questions of how the future will affect not only their research topics, but their research in general.

Agenda Setting and the Mass Media

The topic of agenda setting has been one of the most researched fields in mass communication since its introduction in 1972. McCombs and Shaw (1972) began a research collection of over 200 projects by upholding the hypothesis that the media can't tell us what to think but they can tell us what to think about (McCombs, 1993). The original study of Chapel Hill voters in the 1968 presidential election was heralded mainly for two reasons. First, the relationship between the media agenda and voter's interest in those issues was a staggering +.976 (Lowery & DeFleur, 1983).

Second, and more importantly, the study offered a much sought after rebuttal to the media limited effects theory (Rogers and Dearing, 1988).

Since 1972, agenda setting research has been closely associated with a specific research design, a content analysis of a selected mass media compared with opinion surveys of the audience the selected mass media serves (Rogers, 1993). The concept of a "mass" media is central to agenda setting, it's also going to be the biggest obstacle to be overcome in the Interactive Age.

It can be argued that a mass medium doesn't exist until a researcher says it exists. When a researcher undertakes a project in agenda setting he or she must qualify what should be viewed as the mass media. McCombs and Shaw (1972) chose as part of their mass media, two nightly television newscasts. The question is, why didn't they just choose television as their mass medium and then conduct a content analysis of every television news program to compare against their public opinion results?

The answer is that it was those two news programs that commanded the mass audience, not television. It

wasn't television that attracted the audience, it was the programming. In 1968, audiences remained large due to not having many alternatives. There were just three networks offering three choices in programming. Today, audiences have many more choices. What McCombs and Shaw faced in 1968 was much simpler compared to what an agenda setting researcher will face today.

To illustrate the point, assume a replication of the original agenda setting study was going to be performed today in Chapel Hill. The same nine news sources used by McCombs and Shaw will represent the mass media. The following discussion will cover current problems facing agenda setting research as well as some problems that will be faced in the future.

Television

The NBC and CBS evening news broadcasts were both analyzed in the McCombs and Shaw study. Would those same two newscasts command the same mass audience today? Research upholds that they wouldn't.

In 1978, the major networks commanded over 90% of the television viewing public, now the number is closer to 60% (Sternberg, 1993). Independent networks are controlling close to a fourth of the audience

(Levine, 1990). By 1989 over half the households in Chapel Hill had a cable system, CVI Cable, that brought in 42 channels. The number of Chapel Hill households having cable today is much higher (Chapel Hill Chamber of Commerce). Cable commands over 10 million dollars annually in new subscriptions (Brown, 1992).

This begins to illustrate the obstacles agenda setting researchers will face in the Information Age. As the number of cable channels increase along with the number of VCRs and satellite dishes, the audience that once watched only three television stations began to segment. Cable channels, such as Comedy Central, Mtv, and CNN, that are geared to a specific topic are taking people away from the big three. Mass audiences are beginning to break up.

The introduction of interactive television will further break down the mass audience. When a person has the ability to request what he or she wants to view from a menu on the screen, the audience will have been broken down to its smallest denominators. Interactive television will allow audiences to become segments of one person.

The thought of simply asking your television for a movie and the movie being beamed across fiber optic lines would have seemed ludicrous in 1968, however in 1994 it's already happening. Quantum is a fiber optic cable system in Queens, New York capable of carrying 150 channels and movies on demand (Kaplan, 1992). Countries that have led the way in interactive television provide an insight into what is in store for America.

Japan has already laid their fiber optic highway grid and predicts that one third of their gross national product will be interactive purchases by 2015 (Schlefer, 1991). Over five million people are already hooked up to an interactive marketplace in France (Kaplan, 1992).

Most of the fiber optic grid for the U.S. information superhighway has already been laid by phone companies. Over 95,000 miles are in place (Samuelson, 1993). It's predicted that by the year 2000 over 40% of all U.S. household will possess interactive capabilities through one means or another (Levine, 1990).

Contrary to popular belief, it will not be the computer that will serve as the interactive window, it'll be the television (Brant, Gross, & Coy, 1994). No longer will the television simply be a device to view programming. It can now become everything from your telephone to your shopping mall.

The television is already a home arcade. Sega and Nintendo games are common. What's more, these computer games may provide the off ramps required to connect individual homes to the massive information highway. Sega has developed a computer chip that will allow control of video games, a cable box, a remote, gather electronic mail (e-mail) and converse with other people over your television. Your home's link to the information highway does not have to be hard wired like cable. The Sega unit works through inferred technology. As long as your home is near a receiver, you're connected to the highway.

Whereas the breaking down of the mass audience might not be apparent to consumers yet, television networks are well aware of it. The unthinkable happened in December of 1993. The big three networks

failed to make a profit for the first time (Dizard, 1994). The increasing number of alternatives to the big three began to take a toll. More likely they began to take an audience. Network television survives by selling advertising. An advertiser buys because of the audience television offers. By December 1993, the audience wasn't there, so neither were the number of advertisers needed to make a profit.

As Dizard (1994) points out, the above discussion does not predict a swan song for the big three. They will survive by adapting to the Information Age. The once mass audience is no longer available to them.

Magazines and Newspapers

McCombs and Shaw (1972) chose two magazines as part of their mass media in 1968, Time and Newsweek. If a replication was done today researchers would find that the magazine audience, like the television audience, has begun to fragment.

Also like television, new choices are being offered to the magazine reader. In 1980 there were approximately 1200 magazines in print. In 1990 that number had grown to over 3000 (Eder, 1990).

A closer investigation of Time magazine illustrates what a replication of the McCombs and Shaw (1972) study would face today. Time's readership is down, from 4.8 to four million, and is continuing to fall. Time has twice had to lower the circulation numbers it guarantees to its audience. In addition, Time now puts out over 200 different versions of their magazine focused at different groups of audience (Levine, 1990). Not only is the total magazine audience fragmenting, but even the audience reading one title has begun to fragment.

McCombs and Shaw (1972) also chose, as part of their mass media, five newspapers. Four were local and one, The New York Times, was a national paper.

A researcher that undertakes a replication of the original study would find that, just like magazines, a newspaper reader in Chapel Hill has many more options than in 1968. There are now more weekly papers such as the Chapel Hill News, and more specialized newspapers such as The Independent and The Spectator. What's more, The Independent and The Spectator are free, supported solely by advertising revenue (Chapel

Hill Chamber of Commerce).

While newspapers have kept their stronghold and their audience has remained fairly stable, the Information Age had already begun to change the way newspapers are doing business. Were we to replicate the 1968 study, only the front page and stories under three line headlines would be analyzed for content. A problem that might arise in an agenda setting study today would be the lack of a headline, or even a paper. What if the newspaper stories were simply listed on a computer screen giving the reader the option of choosing only what he or she wanted to read? What if the reader only subscribed to the comics and the sports and nothing else? This is not talk of the future, people in Chapel Hill can already order a newspaper this way.

The national newspaper, The New York Times, has joined with Nynex in offering a fax on demand service (Fitzgerald, 1994). A subscriber needn't pay for the whole paper. Only the portions requested will be sent over the fax machine. Home delivery of newspapers will soon be affected by fax on demand

services. It's estimated that by 1995, over 60 million homes will have a personal fax machine. The reason being that by that time the cost of sending a letter by fax will drop below the cost of sending a letter through the mail and still be far below the cost of a phone call (Waldrop, 1991).

Newspapers are also beginning to make interactive changes in their formats. Two newspapers that were analyzed in the McCombs and Shaw (1972) study, The New York Times and The Raleigh News and Observer, are currently offering an interactive version of their newspaper (personal communication, Raleigh News and Observer, March 28, 1994). A subscriber to an interactive newspaper format will be able to choose what stories he or she wants to view in the same fashion that an interactive television user will be able to choose what program he or she want to view. Interactive newspaper audiences, like interactive television audiences, will become segments of one.

Many newspapers, including the two used by McCombs and Shaw (1972) are already having the entire morning edition delivered by an electronic paper carrier. The

Chicago Tribune, Albuquerque Tribune, Atlanta Journal, Washington Post, USA Today, and The Los Angeles Times are all being delivered by one computer service or another.

What's more, the text is different. Computer subscribers receive stories with more information than what's printed in the actual paper. They also receive more stories. What's cut from the newspaper will be on the computer feed (Fitzgerald, 1994).

The headlines that McCombs and Shaw (1972) relied on to differentiate between which newspaper stories were analyzed for content and which weren't will no longer be in print. A subscriber to an interactive newspaper will be able to choose what section and what story he or she wants to read from a menu listed on either a computer or television screen (Wimmer, 1993).

Taking the concept of interactive media to its fruition, the newspaper's monopoly (or the television or radio for that matter) on reporting local news is over (Peppers & Rogers, 1993). Anyone with an interactive piece of equipment can give an opinion on a story.

McCombs and Shaw (1972) had the benefit of a truly mass audience served by a truly mass media in 1968. Today's agenda setting researchers cannot replicate earlier studies and hope to attain equal results. The variables have changed.

The Information Age has arrived. Consumers, advertisers, and the media are all beginning to use interactive technology. Two popular computer services, Prodigy and Compuserve, boast over four million subscribers (Donoton, 1993). The two services also boast many advertisers. One reporter was shown 47 ads on his Prodigy service in just the short time needed to gather e-mail (Winski, 1993).

It's this advertiser support that will drive the Information Age. Persons who can afford to purchase interactive hardware will do so. There'll a gap created between the interactive haves and have-nots for a period of time. However, as the cost of hardware continues to drop and the companies offering interactive services attract more advertisers to absorb the cost of services, more people will be able to afford the equipment needed to enter the Information

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Age (Brody, 1990).

The Future of Agenda Setting

The current agenda setting research formula of comparing opinion polls and media content will still work today, to a point.

People are still watching the evening news. People still read the morning paper and people still read large circulation magazines, although in fewer numbers than 1968. The problem begins to show itself when a researcher begins his or her study by trying to pinpoint what media best covers an audience.

McCombs and Shaw (1972) chose their mass media by doing a pretest the spring before the 1968 presidential election. The persons interviewed named the two evening newscasts, five papers, and two national magazines the most. It's for certain that other sources were named, but the sources used provided the best coverage of the Chapel Hill audience.

If the study was done today, would those nine sources cover the audience? They probably wouldn't. As more channels, more magazines, and more newspapers enter into the fold, the number of sources an audience

will begin to rely on will become immense. In the future, the number of sources could become so cumbersome that they couldn't all be analyzed for content. Also, many of the sources will be interactive, individual, personal choices.

When McCombs and Shaw analyzed The New York Times, they saw the same paper everyone in the audience did. When an interactive audience begins choosing their own stories and in their own order, it will become impossible to analyze what a group of people read because they all read a different interactive newspaper.

So is agenda setting research breathing its last? Hardly. Media, no matter how small, will still have a message and an agenda. The agenda setting process, according to McCombs and Shaw (1972) is the transfer of importance of one or more issues from a medium to an audience. This will still occur in the future however in a much smaller circle. As Eder (1990) writes, "We are living in a world of micro everything and macro nothing."

Agenda setting research will begin to go two

directions: homogeneous groups and personal gatekeepers.

Although homogeneous groups are used in research today, the term will take on a different meaning in the future. If a researcher sets apart one group of people due to a specific trait, such as smokers, he or she has created a homogeneous group. They all have something in common. What will be different in the future of agenda setting is that the homogeneous groups will create themselves. This concept is not new. Peppers and Rogers (1993) refer to these homogeneous groups as image tribes.

More and more sources for news and entertainment will create a more and more fractionalized audience. As the number of channels available increases, the number of narrowcasted channels will also increase. In the future, today's comedy channel could become more of a comedy network. Stand-up comedians only on one channel, old comedy programs on another, just comedy movies on another, etc. Imagine a channel that only shows Star Trek reruns and movies again and again. There are already two radio stations that depend solely

on one group for their entire playlist. The all Beatles format is playing in Houston, and the all Elvis format is playing in Kentucky (Staff, 1989). Neither have a large audience. What they do have is a homogeneous audience, an image tribe.

A homogeneous group created by an interactive media that allows the interaction to be between people instead of between a person and a database could would also be of great interest to an agenda setting researcher. Rogers and Dearing (1988) write that the media can only make an individual aware of an issue, it take interpersonal contact to make the issue a personal agenda.

The audience and the sources they choose will create the homogeneous group. In the future a researcher will begin his or her study by locating a homogeneous group, not creating one. The future of agenda setting could mean comparisons between types of audiences and sources proving one to have a better effect on the agenda setting process than another.

It's the personal gatekeeper where agenda setting research will change the most. In the Information Age,

which is the present, the duty of gatekeeper will be taken out of the newsroom and put into the home. A consumer's CPE (consumer premises equipment) will allow a person to pick and choose what he or she wants to read and what they want to see (Dizard, 1994). What is important to them is what they will choose.

The concept of a double gatekeeper, people only being able to choose from what the media gatekeeper sends down the line, will not be the case. The newspapers that already send their dailies over computer networks offer more than what their actual paper offers (Fitzgerald, 1994).

People using these computer networks are charged by the minute. The more information sent down the line, the more the person has to look at. Also, if your competitor sends a story down the line that you don't, due to gatekeeping, you may lose royalties because your customer is reading another source. (Crichton, 1993).

Interactive newspapers could become clearing houses of information, offering what each individual customer wants instead of providing one newspaper for

all customers. The concept will become a one-to-one interactive media instead of a one-to-many mass media.

The study of the personal gatekeeper can occur on one or two levels. A specific gatekeeper could be studied or a homogeneous group of gatekeepers could be studied. The homogeneous group will be defined because they all use a certain source, or group of like sources, to make up their personal list of important issues.

Knowing what sources a personal gatekeeper uses during a time period is not difficult. The bill for the interactive service can list the sources. It's up to the researcher to determine what stories have been chosen.

The personal gatekeeper also adds greater validity to the public issues portion of agenda setting research. In 1968, McCombs and Shaw (1972) interviewed people of Chapel Hill to find what issues were most important to them. This was a sample. These people defined what was public opinion, but when a researcher is dealing with a personal gatekeeper, there is truly only one opinion. The opinion held by the gatekeeper.

What's more, with an agenda setting project dealing with only one person, much more contact can be made between the researcher and the subject.

One question that might arise is that with one gatekeeper and that gatekeeper's chosen sources being the only two variables, aren't the research results already decided? The subject is almost guaranteed to show a link with their sources. Even if this is true, more questions arise. Is it one source or a culmination of all the sources that created the subject's agenda? Does presentation or style have anything to do with the agenda setting process? Is the direction of the agenda setting process truly from the media to the audience, or is the direction from the audience to the media? In other words, does a person who receives his or her information from an interactive source dictate to the source what news has to be provided, or does the source still dictate the agenda? The above questions, and those that will surely arise as agenda setting begins to look at image tribes and personal gatekeepers, can now be studied on a more personal level.

In conclusion, the Information Age is here. The time for researchers to reevaluate their approach to their research is now. The face of the media is changing. The concept of "mass" can no longer apply to any one medium.

By understanding what is happening to the mass media that previous research has relied on, agenda setting can continue to provide many opportunities for advancing knowledge.

No longer will information be transmitted in a one-to-many mass media format. The Information Age has brought with it the computational power to make the media a many-to-many or even one-to-one format.

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